No. 92

The REDEMPTION of Marie Gordon

THE TRAGIC STORY OF WRONGED WOMANHOOD

Price 10¢

It was some time before she could think clearly. Amid all her misery the conforting thought, that her husband had not deliberately left her, was uppermost in her mind.

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AN INAUDIBLE GASP came unconsciously as Hazel leaned against the door, with her face deadly white. For a moment it seemed as if she was about to fall, but she kept her upright position with an almost superhuman effort.

She stared at the man who stood like a statue near the window. That form, that face, it might have come from the other side of the world, or the grave itself. She would have known it anywhere.

She staggered like one blinded, dazed.

"Robert!" she whispered under her breath softly. "Robert!"

His heart was beating madly, his blood was on fire, as with one step forward he had her in his arms, locked in a resistless embrace—passion, remorse, shame, yet wild with joy and triumph, as he felt her heart give back throb for throb against his own.

He felt the slight form yield in utter abandonment to him for those first few moments of delirious happiness.

She was the same beautiful Hazel, only more radiant—more matured.

"Hazel—Hazel, thank God, I have found you at last," he cried, his voice breaking into a sob. "Come back to me, my own darling."

Her face was still hidden on his breast. He felt her trembling slightly, but she made no answer. The whole tide of her memory with all its cruel weight of wrong swept over her soul.

Then she started from his arms, and freeing herself with a desperate movement, she stepped back.

He saw her downcast eyes, the constant quiver of her lips.

"Can you forgive me, Hazel?" he pleaded.

"How can you ask it?" she replied with her voice

slightly raised. "Forgive? It is so easy to plead for that when you have taken full license of sin, and grown weary of the worthless companion, whom you left, abandoned, a young wife scarcely eighteen.

"You cared very little how you exposed me to most frightful temptations and dangers in my despair. Had I dishonered you like you have me, you would stab me to the heart in your madness.

"Had I been as faithless to you as you have been to me, you would have killed your rival; but no, you were a man. You may do as you like, it is the woman who must pay. You have robbed me of everything which made life worth living.

"When you tricked me into marrying you I became your plaything. I was legally no wife. You left me when I wanted you most, and gave you name to the woman whose wealth tempted you."

Robert Ames had staggered back a few paces as he listened to this denunciation. Her steady flow of stinging words almost took away his breath.

"For God's sake, don't say that you cannot forgive me, Hazel!" he cried, flinging himself at her feet. "I deserve your bitter reproach, but you wrong me when you say that I abandoned you wantonly.

"In spite of all the overwhelming evidence against me, you alone have held my heart. I have loved you always, even when that cruel letter fell into my hands. I could not believe that you had given yourself to another man.

"I was made the victim of cruel circumstances. There was no escape for me. On my knees I plead with you to have pity. The suffering I caused you came back to me a hundredfold.

"To my misery was added the accusing voice of a guilty conscience. I would have given my very life to

undo the wrong I have done.

"When at last I was able to come to you, I found the house deserted. You had gone with that other man, and your own letter dealt a blow to my hopes."

Robert Ames was weeping bitter tears as he bent to kiss the hem of her dress.

Hazel stood there transfixed, then began to tremble from head to foot. The passionate impulse to yield to his pleading rushed into her heart.

It softened instantly, and with the tears streaming down her face, she bade him rise.

"If all you say is true, I am your wife in the sight of God, am I not?" she said pleadingly.

"Yes, and you shall be my wife in the eyes of all the world, my darling. We shall be remarried, and this time you will be the true wife of Robert Ames."

The last vestige of anger or ill feeling was swept away. She lay again in his arms, sobbing quietly and happily.

Chapter 309

RAILWAY TRAGEDY

JUST A YEAR had elapsed since the events chronicled in the foregone chapters. And now the scene of action shifts to England and to the rather insignificant village of Earl's Monkton. Here we find Alice Procter, the late Mrs. Robert Ames, or "Alice Mortimer," as she called herself now, thoroughly established among new surroundings and new friends. Once more the marriage altar beckoned.

This time Graham Ericsen, the handsome young heir of the immense Ericsen estate had offered himself as the victim. He, too, had fallen desperately in love with Alice's compelling charms and wonderful beauty

Alice, playing a new role, had slowly but surely won the friendship and good will of all with whom she came in contact. The poor villagers fairly worshipped her.

And not without reason.

With a definite purpose in view, Alice played the role of a most sympathetic "Lady Bountiful". She visited the sick and helped the needy. And she took precious good care that young Graham Ericsen's rich uncle heard about it.

For the latter persistently frowned upon the union between his nephew and the beautiful strange woman in the village.

All his efforts to pry into the past of this lovely "Miss Mortimer," had failed. No one seemed able to tell him whence she came and what her family connec-

tions were.

He could not help being amazed at Alice's constantly growing popularity. Just the same he had given her to understand that his nephew Graham Ericsen could never marry her. He wanted to chose Graham's wife, and had already made the selection.

So this was the situation before the strange and very mysterious railway tragedy happened.

Most people living in small towns and villages within a radius of perhaps a hundred miles, went to London to do their shopping. A number of accommodation trains were run for this purpose.

One day, as the two o'clock train came to a stop at Earl's Monkton station, there was quite a commotion.

A beautiful young woman, apparently in a half-fainting condition, appeared at the door of a first-class carriage. She seemed about to fall as she cried out in a shrill voice:

"Help — help! Oh, won't someone please come here at once!"

Only a few idlers and a porter or two were on the platform when this utterly unexpected cry smote the air.

All these turned at the sound of the agonized voice, and one of the porters ran to the carriage door, while the other shouted to the guard, who was descending from his van.

"What's up?" said this personage.

The few idlers, augmented by the newspaper-boy and the waiting-room attendant, were now gathered round the door of the carriage.

They all knew the girl, who, leaning heavily on Wilson, the porter, was assisted by him on the platform. The guard came in unceremoniously amongst the little

group.

"What's the mater?" he repeated. "Is the lady ill?"

As he spoke he did, from habit, what no one else had yet done, being too occupied with the lady — he looked into the carriage.

"Good God!" he exclaimed, starting back in horrible alarm.

In the far corner of the compartment, leaning up against the side in a huddled position, was an elderly man.

He might almost have looked merely asleep but for a certain propped-up aspect. The guard stepped inside and gently lifted the drooping head.

Dead, without doubt — already stiffening—but with no marks of violence and no stain of blood. The guard had been only a week on this train.

He did not know the dead man; but he remembered having noticed him enter the train at the London terminus.

He stepped out on to the platform, waving back the knot of people, who, awestruck and alive with curiosity, pressed eagerly forward.

"Stand back, please!" he said authoritatively, and they obeyed, while the guard turned to the lady.

"It's Miss Mortimer," said Wilson. "She ain't fit to say nothing. I'll take her to the waiting-room."

"Stay!" said the guard. "Perhaps she knows who the gentleman is."

The girl lifted her head in the effort to rally. The onlookers surged forward excitedly to hear what she might say, and a wave of horror went through them as she uttered a name—

"Mr. Ericsen."

Everybody seemed to repeat the name under

breath. A man who harmed no one, who was seen daily in the village, and was known and respected by all—who could care to take his life?

"'Tain't possible!" said Wilson, voicing the general feeling.

But to the guard Mr. Ericson was only an everyday gentleman, happening to travel by that train, and there was no particular additional horror in the fact that the lady who gave information was named Miss Mortimer.

"Take the young lady to the waiting-room," he said. "Here, you"—to the gaping newsboy—"run for the police, hard as you can, and tell them to bring along a doctor."

The boy rushed off, delighted to give the terrible news first-hand. The guard locked the door of the compartment where the murdered man lay, and lowered the blind.

"Where's the station-master?" he said to the other porter Earl's Monckton possessed. "Gone out, has he? Well, fetch him, and hurry up the police. I'll have to get on."

As the porter turned to obey, the station-master made his appearance. He had met the newsboy, and hurried on.

He cleared the platform, and gave orders for the necessary wires back to Hedgemoor Junction, the last stopping-place, and on to the next station.

Scarcely had this been done, when the police-sergeant, with a constable and a doctor, arrived on the scene.

"The boy you sent says it's Mr. Ericsen," said Sergeant Harris incredulously.

"That's what the young lady who found him says," answered the guard, unlocking the carriage door.

"I don't know."

"What young lady? Where is she?"

"The porter took her to the waiting-room. She seemed in a sort of faint."

The sergeant turned to his subordinate.

"Go to the waiting-room," he said, "and keep the lady under your eye till I come along."

He and the doctor stepped into the carriage. Both almost started back, and looked at each other, with an almost inarticulate whisper of the dead man's name.

Murder—always horrible—seems more intensely so when the murdered man is a familiar figure in one's daily life, whether as friend or neighbor.

"I didn't think there was anyone who would lay a hand on him," said the sergeant, in a hushed voice. "He seems quite dead, sir."

"Quite," returned the doctor, "and I should say, has been dead for at least an hour. He had better be removed, and I can then ascertain the cause of death."

Amid an awestruck silence the dead man was carried into the station-master's private room, there being but one waiting-room, which was occupied by Miss Mortimer; and Dr. Jameson made a brief examination.

"The murderer used some very sharp instrument," he said, "and used it expertly. Death was almost instantaneous, and the bleeding internal."

"That accounts for there being no blood about the carriage," said the sergeant, "and no signs of a combat or struggle. Perhaps the young lady can throw some light on the matter."

"We had better wire to young Mr. Ericsen," suggested Dr. Jameson.

"Yes, sir. I'll see to that. It'll be a terrible blow to him."

"Yet he and his uncle had some differences."

"Only about Miss Mortimer, as I've heard tell, sir — they were good friends, all the same."

The sergeant, while he spoke, was performing his examination of the body.

A valuable ring, which Mr. Ericson always wore, was still on his finger; nor had his gold watch and chain been taken.

In the pockets were found a card-case, a purse containing silver, a pencil, and a knife, with one or two other unimportant things.

"It's been robbery, sir, depend upon it," said Harris. "I always said that was a dangerous habit the old gentleman had of going to town so regular for his rents—such things get known, one can never tell how. He never got into the carriage with this half-empty purse."

"He was certainly eccentric," said the doctor. "Are you going to have the body removed immediately to The Croft?"

"Yes, sir—there's no reason against it. I'll have to get Mr. Graham's London address from the servants. I'll just step in and see that young lady."

But first he spoke to the guard, and, after hearing what the latter knew, and taking his name and address, he signified that the train could proceed, the carriage which was the scene of the murder being detached.

As soon as Harris opened the door of the waiting-room he nearly sprang back.

"Seems as if there's nothing but surprises," he thought. For there stood a person as well-known as Mr. Ericsen himself—Alice Mortimer.

The mysterious affair seemed strangely complicated by her unwitting share in it, and unpleasantly so to herself. For all Earl's Monckton knew the position she held towards the two Ericsens.

She was the most beautiful woman one was likely to see in a lifetime, perfect in form and feature — a flawless face.

Even its now deathly pallor and the drawn lines of suffering could not take from, but rather added to, its exceptional beauty.

The large eyes stared blankly at the two men; the mouth quivered painfully; but to the doctor's eyes there were some signs about her which were not explained by the guard's "She seemed in a sort of faint."

"I'm very sorry, Miss Mortimer," began the sergeant respectfully. "They only said 'a lady,' and I hadn't an idea it was you. Jim"—to his man—"you wait outside."

The doctor went up to her, and took her hand.

"This is a terrible thing!" he said gently.

She looked at him piteously.

"Is he—dead?" she whispered.

"I am grieved to say—yes." As he spoke, standing close to her, there came to him a faint, familiar odor. "What's this?" he said quickly. "Chloroform?"

The girl's beautiful eyes widened with a startled look.

"Is it?" she said. "They gave me something. Oh, how horrible it is!" She sank into the chair near, and covered her eyes with her hands, shuddering convulsively.

Harris, after waiting a minute, and exchanging a significant look with the doctor, said—

"Do you mean somebody drugged you, Miss Mortimer? I should be glad if you'd tell me what you know. You see, miss," he began to hesitate, for the girl had removed her hands, and was looking at him fixedly. "I've got to do my duty—a very unpleasant one—but as you were the only person in the compartment when the

gentleman was found——"

"What do you mean?" she faltered. "What does he mean?" turning helplessly to the doctor.

"Tell him all you know, my dear," said the latter soothingly.

"It'll be much the best for you, Miss Mortimer," put in Harris, in an encouraging tone. "Only, it's my duty to tell you to be careful what you say."

She started up, trembling.

"Why should I be careful?" she said. "I've nothing to hide. Oh! you can't think such a terrible thing!"

Then a sob broke her utterance. The doctor put her back in the chair, and both men fell to soothing her. She was such a beautiful woman.

If she had been a plain one it might have occurred to them that she lacked self-control.

"She's been drugged, for certain," whispered Dr. Jameson to the sergeant. "There must have been somebody else in the compartment."

Harris nodded, and took out his note-book.

"Now, Miss Mortimer," he said, "please tell me all you know—how you came to be with the old gentleman, and so on."

She passed her hand over her forehead once or twice, and then seeming to resign herself to the inevitable, said in a low voice—

"I went up to town this morning to shop—I often do. Coming home, I was a little late for the train, and had to get into the first carriage I could—I found Mr. Ericsen there."

"Did you have any conversation with him, Miss Mortimer?"

"Oh, yes——"

"What kind of conversation, Miss?"

Again Alice Mortimer put her hand to her fore-

head. Naturally the whole occurrence had overwhelmed her.

"Very friendly," she said, with a choke in her voice. "He always was friendly towards me, in spite of everything."

Both men, knowing her relations towards Mr. Ericsen, understood why the memory of his kindliness should touch her so.

They remained silent, and Alice Mortimer, with a visible effort, resumed her story.

"A man came into the carriage at Rylands," she said, "and a little time after it must have been that he drugged me. I remember a sort of sickening odor—and when I came to myself the man was gone, and we had passed the junction. He must have got out there——"

"Can you describe him, Miss Mortimer?" said the sergeant, taking no notice of the conjecture—that was his province.

"I don't think I can now," said the girl, confusedly. "I feel so stupid."

"Did you see that Mr. Ericsen was dead, Miss Mortimer?"

"Not at first—I was still dazed."

"What did you do?"

"I couldn't do anything—I was so horrified when I realized that he wasn't asleep, but dead. I think I must have half-fainted, for the next thing I remember is calling out for the guard here."

Then she began to sob bitterly.

"Oh! don't ask me any more questions! It's so dreadful — so dreadful! Take me home! You won't keep me here, will you?"

Harris looked positively distressed.

"I'm afraid I mustn't let you go, Miss Mortimer," he said, "at once, at any rate. I must ask you to come to

the police station with me." He began to stammer.

"It's a mere matter of form, Miss Mortimer—a bit of a search——"

"Come, Miss Mortimer," said the doctor, gently. "It will be all over very soon. Harris must do his duty, and in these cases a certain amount of suspicion attaches to the person last with the deceased. We shall send for young Mr. Ericsen——"

"Poor Graham! Poor Graham!" she murmured, turning aside. Then she seemed to pull herself together, and turned to Harris.

"I am sure you are only doing your duty," she said earnestly, "and I will try and do mine."

"Thank you, Miss Mortimer," said the man, much relieved. "It's very unpleasant for you, but you'll find it best to face it."

The station omnibus was sent for, and the sergeant, Dr. Jameson, and Alice entered it. Wilson and the constable followed on foot.

By this time the news had spread through the village, and a crowd of people had gathered round the door of the station. They greeted the appearance of Miss Mortimer with sympathetic remarks.

At the police station all that was found on Alice bore out her story.

There were some receipted bills bearing the names of London tradesmen, and the gold in her purse, which might seem a larger amount than usual after the inroads of a shopping expedition, she said she had received in change for two notes she had taken with her.

No weapon of any sort was found on her — the doctor felt sure there would not be.

He secretly scouted the idea that a slight young woman, with no especial muscular development, could have the strength for the blow which had killed Mr.

Ericsan.

The sergeant felt himself, when the whole investigation was over, in a fix. To arrest a young lady of Miss Mortimer's standing in the neighborhood seemed ridiculous.

There was hardly sufficient ground for such a course either. Her story was perfectly reasonable: there certainly must have been a third person in the compartment, and her inability to describe him did not go for much.

She probably did not observe him closely, and her subsequent condition would obliterate any impression she might have formed.

Nothing incriminating was found on her. She would, the sergeant reflected, hardly have been suspected at all had it not been that there was a motive in her case.

That that motive would lead a delicately-nurtured young lady of unimpeachable character to commit a murder was a preposterous idea.

"Well, Miss," said Harris, at last. "I won't trouble you any more now. I must keep these things of yours till after the inquest. I don't see that I need detain you——"

He paused. Alice had sat with her face half-shaded by her hand, and now she lifted it slowly.

"I shall not leave home," she said. "I understand my position."

"Very well, Miss." Harris did not inform her that, once at home, she would not be able to leave it. "I'm very sorry to have caused you so much unpleasantness."

"Oh, pray don't apologize—you must do what is right, but I was so upset I did not understand at first," said the girl, lifting her lovely eyes to his face. "Then

I may go?"

"Certainly, Miss Mortimer."

"Allow me to see you home," said Dr. Jameson, "and be of any service I can till Mr. Ericsen arrives."

"You are too kind, Dr. Jameson. I have really no claim——" But he protested. Alice's wonderful beauty was a power over old and young alike.

So, escorted by Dr. Jameson, and attended to the car by the sergeant and Wilson, the porter, the girl departed for home, and the groups of people dispersed.

The next excitement would be the arrival of the murdered man's nephew, Graham Ericsen, and Earl's Monckton was on the tiptoe of expectation.

Chapter 310

THE LOVERS

OWEVER well she had borne herself lately in the cruel ordeal, Alice Mortimer collapsed when alone at home. The widowed woman with whom she lived was visiting in the North. Graham Ericsen could not arrive till the evening, and then would be detained with the police and other necessary business.

She had no one to sustain her in the unexpected calamity which had fallen on her, and even a girl less cherished than she might well have needed support.

The peculiarities of her position made it additionally horrible that any suspicion should rest on her.

And there might well be another cause of distress — Graham Ericsen would be terribly grieved by the death of his uncle, who had stood to him in place of a father.

The girl did not seem able to keep still. She had touched nothing but a cup of tea since she came home, and had paced up and down the drawing-room with scarcely a pause.

Her eyes perpetually went to the clock, the hands of which had never seemed to drag round so slowly. Outside, it was perfectly silent.

The house stood rather away from the village, and few persons passed it. The only sound within was the faint rustle of Alice's dress as she paced over the carpet.

When the servant had entered with lamps, and retired, the same appalling silence reigned again.

It was near nine before there came the sound of a quick, light step in the lane outside. Alice stood still, her lips bloodless, her eyes strained and glassy.

The step had been close—it came closer, up the garden path, then paused at the hall door. She stood as if petrified until the drawing-room door was opened, and then she half-recoiled with a cry—

"Oh, Graham! Graham! You don't believe it! You know I couldn't do such a thing!"

The man who had entered came swiftly towards her.

"What horrible words to greet me with!" he said, in a hoarse voice. "Come, Alice!" The girl flung herself into his outstretched arms. "My poor girl! My own darling!" he whispered, gathering her to him with an intense passion. "You don't know what you say!"

"Oh, I have gone half-mad waiting for you — waiting!" she said, clinging to him almost frantically.

"My poor girl!" he said again, in tenderest pity; in his desire to comfort her he forgot the he wanted comfort himself.

It was to him perfectly natural—indeed, a matter of course—that she should appeal to him, and cling to him, although she had not loved the dead man, and he had.

The suspicion overshadowing her, which she had had to encounter alone, was quite ground enough, in his view, for forgetfulness of other's needs, and other aspects of the tragedy.

"Alice — my Alice!" he whispered, "you never could have had a real doubt of me—you have been unstrung by the horror of this terrible thing."

"No—no—not a doubt! I never meant that. Did I say that?" said the girl, lifting her face. "I wanted you, Graham—I was all alone—all alone!"

She looked round the room, shrinking closer to him, and then her eyes went up again to his face.

It was pale and haggard. Ericsen hurriedly put his hands over her eyes.

"Never mind how I look," he said. "It is of you I must think. This is nothing, dearest—this sort of suspicion, simply because you were there. Come and sit down—you tremble still."

He put her on a couch, and sat by her, adding—

"You must not be afraid, my heart. I shall be there with you. And suppose — only suppose, because it's impossible—that the whole world were against you. That wouldn't shake me. All the more reason to stand by you."

"Against the whole world!" she murmured. "Oh, Graham, do you love me like that?"

"How else could I love you? How much less? You were vexed with me sometimes, I think, because I could not go against my dear old uncle—God rest him! But you know why that was—because he was the only father I knew, and had to be patient and try to win him.

"Oh, Alice! I can't believe he is dead! I have come from that old home where they have taken him, and it's all empty, and yet I heard his step and his voice! I would give worlds to have him back——"

"Hush, Graham! Don't talk so! You suffer, I know, but let me comfort you." She threw her arms about him, and drew his head down to her shoulders, putting her lips to his cheek.

"You can't break your heart," she whispered, and then drew in her breath sharply.

"No—I have you," Ericsen said, lifting himself, "and I am selfish to give way—this is so much harder for you. Isn't Annie back? Are you really alone?"

"Yes—there are only the servants. Graham have you seen the police? Have they told you everything? I don't want to talk about it to-night if I can help it."

That lovely, piteous look again shadowed her eyes and went to her lover's heart.

If only he could keep the merest breath of trouble from this treasure of his! She was so tender that a touch was to her what a blow would be to those of rougher natures.

He crushed back his own grief, his own desire, that had filled his heart all the way here, to unburden that grief to her, to seek her sympathy, and claim her unbounded love.

She was overwhelmed with terror; the shock she had sustained had unstrung her utterly, and for the present he must keep his trouble to himself.

"You shall not talk about it," he said soothingly, and Alice nestled to him with brightening eyes.

"I'm not so afraid now," she murmured, sinking her head like a tired child. "Graham where have they taken him?"

"Home—to The Croft, dear; that is where I saw him." His voice gave a little, but he steadied it. "And I saw Harris. He says the motive must have been robbery. Can't you remember the man at all? I shall never rest until I find him."

She shuddered.

"I can't describe him clearly, Graham. He was in the carriage such a little time; and I did not notice him much."

"But you have some idea of his appearance," her lover urged. "What sort of a man—not a gentleman, surely?"

"I suppose not exactly," said Alice Mortimer, hesitating; "at least, he wouldn't be. I think he was

dressed like one. He got in all in a hurry."

"At Rylands, you said. Did he seem looking for a particular carriage?"

"I don't know — the first I saw of him was his springing in just as the train was moving."

"You did not tell that to Harris."

"I was so confused," half-pleaded the girl. "I could not think of everything at once. Things come to me piecemeal."

"Of course, darling. I wish to Heaven Uncle Arthur would have listened to me! I always told him that was an unsafe practise of his — it made me anxious often. He hadn't a chance to lift his hand in defense, and the murderer seems to have left no trace. But I must find him! I must!" He started up with flashing eyes. "Before Heaven, I will!"

"Graham! Is that a vow?" cried Alice Mortimer, springing up. "Don't take it! Suppose you fail! Vows come back—they come back! Don't make more misery! Suspicion will die out about me—and who will suspect you?"

"Suspect me!" said Ericsen, slowly and wonderingly. She pushed her hand through her hair in a confused way.

"No one, of course," she said. "I meant—I meant — if we do not find the murderer, still we shall stand clear."

"You are torturing yourself with fresh fears," he said, tenderly.

He led her back to the couch, and drew her to his arms again.

In all the hurry of his sudden journey, and the whirl and stress of business and acute suffering, he had not realized that the death he would have compassed Heaven and earth to avert made him a well-off man, and

not only that, but free to claim, without a scruple or hindrance, the woman he loved.

His uncle no longer stood in the way with objections and dislikes, but the clearer realization was to Ericsen only the last and bitterest blow.

He sat for some moments in dead silence, feeling the quick beats of the girl's heart against his own, and the soft movement nearer that she made now and then, as if she gave mute sympathy.

"Alice, dearest," he whispered at last, "you won't hold that fear—about me?"

"I can't help it," she whispered back.

Only fear for him, when the happiness she had been denied by a groundless prejudice was within reach!

What a heart of gold hers was! the young man thought, with a rush of tenderness for her and for that very prejudice which he had chafed at, while it thwarted him.

The man who held it was gone, and only the love, not the mistake, remained with his successor.

"There is no cause for fear," he said, soothing her. "Because I benefit—God help me!—is no reason for serious suspicion. You forget yourself in me, my darling! I shall do all that man can to find the murderer, but not because only thus can I be proved wholly innocent."

"I know I am foolish," she whispered, "and can't see things in their real light. Oh, Graham! I'm so glad you are here! It seems as if all that occurred to-day could not have happened—was only a dream—now that I have you!"

"And having me to lean on and trust to, you will give up all dread?" said Ericsen, thrilled by the loving words. "I shall take on myself all the necessary busi-

ness. You will try and sleep to-night, dearest? I wish Annie was with you."

"Oh, yes, I will try," said the girl, lifting eyes that had almost a smile in their dark depths.

"I will leave you now, then," he said, "and see you again early to-morrow. Goodnight, my own—be brave for my sake. No harm can come near you, because you are mine. Believe that, my faith, and love will never dim."

Words that might put life and strength into the feeblest soul—words uttered with an intensity that made them like a vow.

Alice Mortimer's eyes were half-lifted, half-drooping, while she listened. A faint, soft smile lingered round her mouth.

"Am I to promise?" she asked.

"So, darling—with your lips on mine."

It was hard to leave her — harder than he had ever found it before. But he got away at last, and once more Alice was alone.

Ericsen went back to the desolate house. Strive as he would to shut it out, that clear sight of the future, once seen, remained. Even in the death-chamber, to which he went the last thing, it was there.

It must have come, he knew, but he blamed himself bitterly nevertheless. It was like sacrilege to recall, if only passingly, his own gain; to let a single thought of self obtrude on this solemn time.

And yet, if he could have called the dead back to life, with the inevitable resumption of the old conditions, he would have done it gladly.

As he stood, looking at the quiet figure so cold in death, he no longer tried to control his emotions nor his tears. He fell on his knees and wept. For a long time he remained thus.

When he arose at last, there was an expression of terrible determination on his handsome face.

"I'll find out who did this horrible thing," he muttered grimly. "I shall not rest until the murderer has been brought to justice. No matter who it may be he shall suffer."

But when he thought of Alice Mortimer, the woman he loved so dearly, his heart softened. Not for a moment did he suspect that she could have been implicated in some way.

Chapter 311

THE INQUEST.

IT WAS found impossible to hold the inquest until the second day after the murder. There was so much to be done, and the person under suspicion must have time to engage legal assistance and arrange her defense.

Ericsen sent for his own London lawyer; the solicitor representing the police came from Hedgemoor, which was a large town.

Nothing was talked of or thought of save the murder. On the whole, local opinion went against the suspicion attaching more or less to Alice Mortimer.

It was, of course, well known that old Mr. Ericsen had never sanctioned her engagement to his nephew, although he had maintained civil terms with her, and the affection between him and Graham had never been impaired by this vital difference.

It was conjectured that the young man would probably inherit his uncle's fortune, acquired during a distinguished career at the bar; and there were not wanting sinister remarks on these circumstances, and a putting of two and two together.

The inquest was held, by Ericsen's request, in the dining-room of The Croft, an old-fashioned roomy house, surrounded by large gardens and orchards, standing at one end of the village.

Here crowded London reporters and all sorts and conditions of men from Hedgemoor and Rylands and the surrounding country.

Hither came also various strangers, witnesses

from London, it was said, about whom there was great curiosity.

But the greatest interest was reserved for the two people most concerned, and the entrance of the coroner and jury, after viewing the body, was scarcely noticed in the general eagerness to see Graham Ericsen and Alice Mortimer.

That he brought her in, and that she sat by his side, proved, it was whispered, that he at least gave no credence to the idle story of her guilt.

Alice, dressed in black, a light veil drawn over her beautiful features, seemed composed, and maintained her painful position with quiet dignity.

The man had no friendly screen from the too curious eyes of the public, which fact did not, however, seem to trouble him much.

He neither avoided nor ostentatiously met it; his dark grey eyes glanced easily over the room as he entered, and he bowed to those people he knew and caught sight of, as he would have done on any ordinary occasion.

The police evidence was called first. Sergeant Harris created the first sensation of the day, for after he had deposed to what passed at the railway and police stations, and produced the articles found on the dead man and on Miss Mortimer, he handed up another object.

"This was brought to me early this morning," he said.

Everyone stretched forward to see.

The whisper went around: "What is it?"

Graham Ericsen, it was noticed, shuddered, slightly, and half turned his face aside. Alice, on the contrary, leaned forward.

A rather long knife of the finest steel; a deadly-

looking weapon, and a rather unusual one in England.

"Where was this found?" the sergeant was then asked.

"Just this side—the Earl's Monckton side — of Hedgemoor Junction. One of the plate-layers picked it up."

Harris was asked about the third person alleged to have been in the carriage. Here he was reticent—the police were making inquiries, and he should be in a position later on to give information.

He showed a distinct bias towards the theory of robbery, and as the bias coincided with the popular feeling, it made a profound impression.

The sergeant then described the further minute examination of the carriage. No addition discovery had been made.

The only thing now noticed, and not noticed on the first examination, was a very slight mark on the carpet such as might be produced by a hot substance resting on it momentarily.

No one was able to say whether it was an old mark, but probably it was, as the carriage had not been done up for some time.

No importance was attached to the mark — no doubt it was caused by some careless person surreptitiously smoking.

Mr. Lane acting for Alice Mortimer, cross-examined. The replies elicited showed that Harris had no doubt at all of the story told him; the young lady was, of course, very upset and frightened, but he saw nothing suspicious about her demeanor.

Dr. Jameson followed.

After the technical portion of his evidence, the knife was handed to him, with reference to his opinion that a very sharp instrument had been used.

The doctor said such a weapon as that shown him would produce death in the manner he had described.

He could not say, without tests, whether the stains on the knife were partly of blood. He then deposed to Miss Mortimer's physical condition; she had undoubtedly been drugged, though not very heavily.

Probably, the first return to consciousness was only partial, and the succeeding faint condition was largely induced by the drugs.

Dr. Jameson was also cross-examined.

"Now," said Mr. Lane, "you have seen Miss Mortimer, and had an opportunity of observing her. Should you call her a very muscular person?"

"No; she would have average strength."

"A blow such as that dealt to the deceased—we will not say with the knife produced, because it is not yet proved that is the one used, but with some such weapon such a blow would require a strong hand?"

"Oh, certainly."

"A man's?"

"Decidedly, a man's." said the doctor emphatically.

Mr. Jackson, of Hedgemoor, asked in a brief re-examination, whether there was not more skill than strength required in the use of sharp, fine weapons.

Dr. Jameson considered skill was necessary, but so was strength; and, as he retired, everyone thought Mr. Jackson's question absurd, for how should a young lady like Miss Mortimer possess such skill?

The evidence of the guard and the porter, the constable, and the platelayer, some of it corroborative only, occupied a great part of the day.

The guard said he had observed nothing unusual in the carriage during the stoppage at Hedgemoor. Contrary to expectation, Alice was not yet called.

The next witness was the housekeeper at The Croft. She said her master had mentioned to her that he was as usual going to receive some rents, but he might make some payments out of the money so received before leaving town.

She did not know how much gold he had. Two or three London tenants of Mr. Ericsen's then deposed to paying their rents on the day in question.

The afternoon was waning—there would be only time for a portion of Alice's evidence. She rose slowly, amid a hush, as her name was called, and went forward.

So wonderfully beautiful a creature suspected of a foul crime—forced to stand on her defense!

The thing was an outrage, and the police were very dull. Every eye gazed eagerly at the girl, and a faint blush made her more perfectly lovely.

She was fair, and the black she wore threw up marvelously her transparent complexion and hair.

"I never saw anything more absurd in my life!" said a sapient London reporter, in indignant tones. "She looks more fit to nurse a sick man back to life than to harm a fly!"

And Ericsen almost smiled to himself as he thought how easily such a suspicion could be refuted; she need scarcely do more than to stand before her accusers.

She repeated her story without any of the deviations common to inexperienced witnesses, only Harris referred to his notes when she mentioned that the third passenger got in in a hurry.

She still had no clear memory of him; her impression was that he was well dressed and fairly young.

She was asked about her engagement with Mr. Graham Ericsen, and the terms on which she stood tow-

ards the deceased.

Her answers showed that these terms, if not neighborly, were not inimical. Mr. Ericsen, unfortunately, did not like her, but, if he met her anywhere, he was always civil, though naturally not cordial.

Did his opposition to her marriage produce any annoyance or anger in her mind? she was asked.

"I suppose there were times when I was vexed," said Alice, with a regret everyone could understand; "and, of course, I was pained."

She was shown the knife.

The eager eyes fixed on her saw no change save a slight shrinking movement, instantly repressed, natural to any woman at sight of a ghastly-looking weapon, and especially to a woman so closely connected with the tragedy.

It seemed a mere formality to ask her if she had seen it before, and her negative answer was a matter of course. She was questioned closely about her proceedings in town.

All her answers were clear and bore the impress of truth, with only those lapses of memory on small details without which a witneess is rarely reliable.

This part of the evidence was interrupted by the rising of the Court for the day.

Alice Mortimer looked even more pathetically beautiful the next morning, when her examination was resumed, and the room was still more densely packed.

Mr. Jackson and the coroner both asked her pressing questions on the subject of the unknown passenger, while Mr. Lane watched alertly.

"You have said," observed Mr. Jackson, "that this person got in at Rylands hurriedly. But, supposing him the murderer, the deed was certainly premeditated, and in that case he would require to discover in which

carriage Mr. Ericsen was."

"I can only say what struck me," answered Alice; "would he perhaps have changed carriages?"

"The guard has stated," interposed Mr. Lane, "that there was only one first-class coach; therefore much scrutiny would not be necessary."

"That is so," Mr. Jackson answered. "You are quite sure, Miss Mortimer, that the man was in a hurry?"

"I am quite sure of my impression. But he may have been on the platform before I saw him."

The railway evidence did nothing to strengthen the theory of the third passenger.

The booking clerk at Rylands had not issued a first-class ticket by that train; he had, however, issued two third-class ones. He had taken no particular notice of the persons applying for these, but one was a woman.

The porter at Rylands, who, with the station master, acted as ticket collector, said he had seen no one on the platform who answered to such a description of the third passenger as had been given.

Mr. Lane elicited from this witness that, as is frequent in wayside stations, the tickets were not always clipped before departure, especially if they were returns; but usually they were.

The guard, recalled, said he did not see a man enter a first class compartment.

It was shown also that it would be difficult to evade the ticket collector at Hedgemoor Junction; on the other hand it was possible for the man to have alighted when the train slowed down before entering the station.

Mr. Jackson questioned the guard on this point, and received an odd bit of evidence.

Continued in next number

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